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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AMERICA IN 1819

A CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNT

In Washington, at the Catholic University, on February 20, 1919, before eighty bishops assembled to do honor to the illustrious Cardinal Gibbons, His Eminence Cardinal O'Connell in a striking phrase spoke of "the unimaginable transition from the infant church of Maryland to the giant church of America." In this period of reconstruction, we are accustoming ourselves more and more to attempt to see what is beyond tomorrow, and less and less to remembering what was before yesterday. Yet one important element in what is and is to be, is what was, for our corporate life holds in itself in effect all that it has lived; and reconstruction without tradition is unintelligent. There was another period in our history when it seemed that an age was over and another just beginning, and when men with imagination were wondering to themselves what the Church was to be in the coming century, a hundred years ago. We, who, in a sense, are where they were, may find inspiration in seeing just what they were, and fortunately we possess contemporary accounts in the writings of Kohlmann, England, Maréchal, Dzierzynski, Flaget and Grassi, of their position, their problems, difficulties and fears. The account of the last named writer may prove most interesting as being from the viewpoint of an outsider, who yet took an intimate part in church development during the years 1810-1817, and who wrote his memoir, "Notizie Varie" in Milan in 1818.¹

¹ GIOVANNI GRASSI, S.J., *Notizie varie sullo stato presente della Repubblica degli Stati Uniti d'America settentrionale, scritte al principio del 1818*. Ed. 2. Milano par Giovanni Silvestro, MDCCXIX. (Georgetown University, Riggs Library, *Shea Collection*, 162.73.) Part of the work appeared in translation in the American Catholic Historical Society *Researches*, vol. viii., pp. 98-111, taken from the *Woodstock Letters*, vol. xi., No. 3.

John Anthony Grassi was one of those European Jesuits who played a great part in helping the expansion of the Church and of the Society in America after its restoration, and the story of his coming here is interesting and typical.²

Father Louis Poirot, the last of the old Jesuit missionaries in China, musician to the Court of Peking, wrote with his dying hand to the Pope asking for a successor. The Holy Father sent the petition on to Father General Gruber, who immediately ordered Fathers Korsack and Grassi to come to him at Petersburg with mathematical, physical and astronomical books. Father Grassi, who was born at Bergamo, September 10, 1775.³ and had been a novice at Colorno under the Ven. Joseph Pignatelli, set out with his companion from Polocz, where he had been preparing for the Armenian mission at Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea. Once with the General they received their orders, and then began, in February, 1805, a strange Odyssey that was to last five years and end, not in Peking but in Baltimore. Through Russia and Finland, they crossed the frozen sea to Aland Island, over the Gulf of Bothnia to Sweden and Stockholm; then to Copenhagen, by a change of plans. Again a disappointment, and they crossed a stormy winter sea to London. From here they were sent to Lisbon, and they stopped off at Cork on the way. At Lisbon they tarried long, after a new disappointment, waited for orders from Russia, and studied astronomy there and at Coimbra. We pass over all their attempts and failures to get a ship, and find them once more in England in November, 1807, to make another effort to set sail, and meanwhile to study more astronomy in London. Then came orders to go back to Russia to make a new attempt by way of Tartary, only to be followed by others soon after assigning Grassi to the mission of Maryland, just then in pressing need of men. He sailed from Liverpool on August 27, 1810, landed in Baltimore on October 20, and went straight on to Georgetown. The Maryland mission at this time was in a state of transition from the older regime, and on October 16, 1811, Grassi at the age of thirty-three, was named Superior, and Rector

² *Woodstock Letters*, Vol. iv, pp. 114 sq.

³ And not, as stated in *ACHS Researches, l.c.*, October 12, 1778, where he is confounded with Nicholas Grassi, who entered the same day, November 16, 1779, *Catal. Prov. Ital, S. J.*, 1829.

of Georgetown by the General, who passed over Kohlmann "on account of his important labors in New York."⁴

Grassi did very much to "revive" Georgetown, to use Carroll's phrase; it was during his administration that President Madison signed the Act of Congress (1815), raising the college to the rank of a University. He remained in his position of Superior of the mission until July, 1817, when he left for Europe on business for the Society and for Archbishop Neale. He was never to return. He published his *Notizie* at Milan in 1818, and a second edition appeared the following year.

It is a fair-sized book of 146 pages and is divided into three parts: *Notizie varie* (pp. 1-59), on the climate, soil, products, commerce, population, characters, costume, literature and government; on the various sects in the states (pp. 60-110); and on the present state of the Catholic religion, (pp. 111-146), under two headings, *Diocesses* and *Churches and functions*. Annexed to the volume is a double-page statistical table giving, in parallel columns, the names of states with latitude and longitude, area in square miles, products, minerals, population in 1790 and in 1810, inhabitants per square miles, capital and principal cities with respective population, universities and colleges, and number of representatives in Congress, an imposing array, showing that he had made full and sympathetic use of his time here in America.

What was the position of the Church as he saw it here a century ago? As is well known, the Province of Baltimore embraced the sees of Baltimore (1789) and the newly erected sees (1808) of Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Bardstown. New Orleans, which was added in 1803, had been founded in 1793, and its first Bishop was Peñalver y Cardenas; Charleston and Richmond were not to follow until 1820, and Cincinnati in 1821. Archbishop Carroll had died in 1815; Leonard Neale had succeeded, and died in 1817, and Ambrose Maréchal, (1764-1828) was now archbishop. The Diocese of Baltimore at this time comprised the states south and southwest of Maryland, and for this territory in 1818, there were 53 priests, of whom 24 were seculars, 20 were Jesuits, and 9 Sulpicians.⁵

⁴ HUGHES, *Hist. of S. J. in N. A., Documents*, ii, 992, General, Rome, to Carroll, 20 Nov., 1811.

⁵ Maréchal to Propaganda, HUGHES, *Docs.*, ii, 957, 959.

for a population estimated by Maréchal in 1821 to be 80,000. In Baltimore itself there were five churches, including the Seminary Church which, says Grassi, was "Gothic, but elegant." Washington had St. Patrick's and Holy Trinity at Georgetown, too small by two-thirds for the flock. Frederick had its church and one priest, Father Malevé, S.J., who traveled as far afield as Martinsburg and Cumberland. Norfolk and Alexandria had churches; Richmond, Petersburg and Fredericksburg had congregations but no churches. Charleston, S. C., and Augusta, Ga., had each a church and a priest; Savannah had 500 Catholics and a church but no priest,⁶ North Carolina had congregations at Newbern and Washington, but no church until 1823.⁷ Maryland also had churches and large congregations in Prince George's, Charles, St. Mary's and Cecil counties. The diocese of Philadelphia presents two distinct pictures: the four city churches, St. Joseph's, founded by Joseph Grealon, S.J., in 1734,⁸ Holy Trinity (1789), St. Mary's (1763), and St. Augustine's, founded in 1796 by Matthew Carr, O.S.A.; and the outside missions, Conewago, with four Jesuits, Lancaster with one, Gosphenhoppen with two, Loretto in Cambria County, with the illustrious Father Gallitzin—in the whole diocese only thirteen priests for 30,000 people. Of course all these centers had dependent missions, *e.g.*, from Lancaster they went to Elizabethtown, Harrisburg and Chester, from Conewago to York and Carlisle and Westminster, Md.; Gallitzin had an even greater territory, while Father O'Brien at Pittsburg tended a district "equal to ten dioceses in Italy," said Felix de Andreis, on passing through in 1817.⁹ New York was less well off. With an estimated Catholic population of more than 20,000 in 1818, "mostly Irish, whose attachment to the Faith is wonderful," says Grassi, there were two churches, St. Peter's in Barclay Street (1786), and old St. Patrick's, built by Father Kohlmann in 1809-10. Bishop Connolly, O.P., was laboring as a missionary priest almost alone here; he had only four priests, two of them very old. Albany had its St. Mary's Church, and one priest, who traveled all over western and central New

⁶ England, *Works*, Vol. iii, *Hist. of D'oc. of Charleston*, pp. 246 sq. (Balto., 1849).

⁷ *U. S. Catholic Miscellany*, Vol. ii, pp. 54, 96, 146.

⁸ *ACHS Researches*, vol. xvi, p. 82.

⁹ *U. S. Catholic Historical Magazine*, Vol. iii, p. 247.

York, and Utica received a priest and a church in 1819.¹⁰ Outside of these there were no other churches, though many scattered Irish Catholics lived throughout the state. In the Empire State in 1819, the Church had everything yet to do. The real founder of the church in Boston was the Abbé Matignon in 1792, though Rev. C. F. Bouchard de la Poterie had opened a chapel in 1788 for 120 Catholics,¹¹ but it was soon afterwards suspended. It was now presided over by Bishop Cheverus, whose name is illustrious in our annals. He had only three priests for over 800 Catholics, and outside of Boston, only two churches, beside a few stations along the north and south shores. There was the Indian station at Pleasant Point on the Penobscot with one missionary, Father Ryan, and St. Patrick's at New Castle, Maine, in which state, at the constitutional convention of 1819, anti-Catholic legislation was averted and safely weathered by the prompt action of energetic Catholics.¹² In 1820 the first church was built; the year 1817 saw the first ordination, that of Dennis Ryan, and 1818 the holy death of Abbé Matignon.¹³ It was Cheverus who in 1820 was to introduce the Ursulines to Boston, whence six years later they removed to Charlestown.

It is when we come to the West that we find interest and promise. Over those vast reaches very few missionaries traveled, but the very character of the enterprises in such a wilderness is what fires the imagination. Maryland was already old and well established as a Church and had only to carry out its normal development in an enlightened manner to realize its promise. New York and Boston had hardly begun. But the West was palpably growing, emigration had already started, and mere trading stations at a favorable spot on the Great River were in a few years to be cities. In 1808 there was one diocese, Bardstown; thirty years later the assembled bishops at Baltimore asked for an increase in dioceses that brought their total number west of the Alleghenies up to nineteen. There were in 1819 two centers of radiation; New Orleans and Bardstown. The Louisiana Purchase (1803) had brought 30,000 Catholics into the boundaries of the

¹⁰ ZWIERLEIN, *Catholic beginnings in the Diocese of Rochester*, in the *CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW*, Vol. i, p. 284.

¹¹ *U. S. Catholic Historical Magazine*, Vol. iii, p. 314.

¹² *ACHS Researches*, Vol. ix, p. 159.

¹³ SCANLAN, *Brief History of the Archdiocese of Boston* (Boston, 1908), pp. 23, 25.

United States, and after a vacancy of the See since 1802, the Sulpician, Louis W. Du Bourg, was made administrator by Carroll in 1812, and was consecrated Bishop of New Orleans on September 18, 1815, at Rome. In October, 1816, he sent 10 Ursulines from Bordeaux, and in May, 1817, he wrote to Propaganda that he was leaving France with 20 missionaries, having sent 13 more ahead, among them the Lazarists, Felix de Andreis and Joseph Rosati, later Bishop of St. Louis (1827)¹⁴ which at this time was a struggling village. The diocese extended eight or nine hundred miles up the west bank of the Mississippi and was roughly divided into two parts: Upper and Lower Louisiana, in the former of which de Andreis was his Vicar-General. In 1819, Bishop Dubourg had five religious of the Sacred Heart, three of them of a rare talent for teaching.¹⁵ Besides the local population, three separate emigrations of Acadians had come from Maryland from 1765-1767 where 900 of them had settled, and later the Catholic population was further to be increased by a migration of American Catholics from the same state.

Bishop Flaget, S.S., was the pioneer Bishop of Bardstown, and we have his own account of his diocese in a letter to Propaganda of 1815.¹⁶ His diocese ran about 700 miles along the east bank of the Mississippi, and was almost as wide. His priests included four Dominicans, two Sulpicians and four others, among whom were Fathers Badin and Nerinckx, missionaries of long experience in that country. There were in all nine Catholic settlements in Kentucky, eight in Marion County, and one in Scott County, founded between the years 1785 and 1795, and where the Catholics remained close together, the Faith persevered under the ministrations of occasional priests who passed through or came and stayed short periods.¹⁷ In 1819 the Catholic population numbered 10,000, and, to train his own priests, the bishop had begun a seminary in 1811, under Father John B. David, afterward his coadjutor. In both this nascent seminary and the Dominican priory he counted sixteen students

¹⁴ HUGHES, *Docs.*, ii, pp. 1012, 1013, note.

¹⁵ HUGHES, *Text*, ii, 549.

¹⁶ CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW, Vol. i, pp. 305-319, with Fr. O'Daniel's illuminating notes.

¹⁷ WEBB, *Centenary of Catholicity in Kentucky*, pp. 26 sq.

not yet ordained. He had nineteen churches, seven of them erected by Nérinckx. Ohio was then a missionary adjunct of Kentucky and held in all about fifty Catholic families. Its oldest church is St. Joseph's, near Somerset, Perry County, founded on December 6, 1818, by the Dominicans, Edward Fenwick and N. D. Young; they began with ten families and by 1824, there were one hundred and fifty.¹⁸ It was this field that was to win for Edward Fenwick the title of Missionary of Ohio and the onerous post of first Bishop of Cincinnati (1822). In Indiana there was a station at Post-Vincennes, but no priest; in Illinois, three parishes and two priests, the parishes of St. Ann's at Detroit and of St. Anthony's at Raisin River, both under the famous Sulpician, Gabriel Richard, congressman and printer. The Indian missions in all those vast regions were most of them practically non-existent since the collapse of the Jesuit missions after the expulsion of the Society from all French territory in 1763.

In all this expansion since the small beginnings of colonial days, the religious orders played their part. The Jesuits, who in the designs of Providence were the pioneers of the Faith in the colonies and were alone on the scene in Maryland and Pennsylvania up to the Revolution, had 144 active missionaries there in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and, besides from Canada, they labored from Maine to Detroit and from Louisiana up to the Illinois country, making in all 464 Jesuits working in North America in those two centuries.¹⁹ In 1819 they attended 45 stations in Maryland and Pennsylvania, and two in New York, and cooperating with them in those places were twelve secular priests. Their only college, since closing up the New York school,²⁰ was Georgetown, which Grassi left flourishing. In 1823 they were to open a novitiate at Florissant, Mo., near St. Louis, the beginning of the present Missouri province. The Sulpicians, who had opened a seminary and college in Baltimore and a college at Emmitsburg, had 9 members in the diocese and in 1821 were educating 15 Seminarians, 87 in the *petit séminaire*, and 188 in the college in Baltimore; and in Bardstown Father

¹⁸ *U. S. Catholic Miscellany*, Vol. ii, No. 11, pp. 164-5, 1824.

¹⁹ HUGHES, *Text*, ii, Appendix F, p. 704.

²⁰ CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW, April 1918, p. 48.

David, S.S., directed a college with 25 students and 12 seminarians. Of them Carroll had said in 1812: "Too much praise cannot be given by me to the priests of St. Sulpice here for their zeal and sacrifices to the public cause."²¹ The Dominicans under E. D. Fenwick, O.P., had made their pioneer foundation at St. Rose s in Kentucky in 1806, and were teaching in the seminary and performing valiant missionary service in the surrounding states. The Lazarists, who had first come here in 1816, had 9 members here and had founded their first house at the Barrens, afterwards St. Mary's College and Seminary, and under their illustrious superior, Felix de Andreis (1778-1820), were performing the usual laborious missionary work, and having, besides, great success in evangelizing the Indians.²² Communities of women were not wanting, too: the Carmelites (1790), at Port Tobacco; the Visitation nuns (1799), at Georgetown; the Sisters of Charity at Emmitsburg (1808) and New York (1817); the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Kentucky (1813), in which State Father Thomas Wilson, O.P., was to found a community of Sisters of the Third Order of St. Dominic near Springfield in 1822; the Ursulines in Boston (1820), New York (1812), and New Orleans (1727); and Father Nerinckx's community of Friends of Mary at the Foot of the Cross at Loretto in Kentucky (1812), were all doing splendid missionary and educational work. The outlook for vocations among women was bright, but among men not so encouraging, though the dark picture given by Benedict Fenwick, S.J., and Bishop Connolly is somewhat lightened by the optimistic words of Grassi. Fenwick wrote: "What can you do with, or expect from young hairbrained Americans . . . infatuated with the sound of liberty and equality?" "The American youth," adds Connolly, "have an almost invincible repugnance to the ecclesiastical state," yet Grassi says: "A fair number of excellent young men, native to the country, have already entered upon an ecclesiastical career."²³

²¹ HUGHES, *Docs.*, 994, Carroll to Plowden, England, January 27, 1812.

²² *U. S. Catholic Historical Magazine*, Vol. i, pp. 233 sq. *Early Lazarist Missions and Missionaries*.

²³ Fenwick, N. Y., to Grassi, Georgetown, February 20, 1815. HUGHES, *Docs.*, i, p. 835, n. 60. Connolly, N. Y., to Propaganda in BAYLEY, *History of Catholic Church in N. Y.* p. 92.

The nationality of the Catholic populations varied in different localities. In Baltimore they were mostly of English descent, with some Irish and Acadians; in Philadelphia, Germans and Irish; in New York and Boston, mostly Irish; in Kentucky the melting pot was already in operation. Most of these Catholics had brought their religion with them to this country, but Grassi and Kohlmann speak of converts, and hope of converts, especially among the Methodists. The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 threatened for a time, but the good sense and energy of Jefferson averted what was in reality a danger not only for religion but for the country itself. A more lasting danger was the trustee system, which was then beginning to show its ugly head.

Education does not seem to have grown apace with religious expansion, small as that may seem to us now. Georgetown, our first Catholic college, founded by Carroll in September, 1791, with Rev. Robert Plunkett as President (d. 1815), had in 1819 a staff of 11 professors and nearly 100 students, under the presidency of Anthony Kohlmann, S.J.²⁴ St. Mary's College, Baltimore, founded by the Sulpicians in 1799, and attached to the Seminary, had 20 instructors in 1819 and just less than 200 students. Mount St. Mary's, Emmitsburg, founded in 1808 by Father Dubois, S.S., with 7 students, had 60 students in 1805, and in 1818 was just emerging from a crisis that was only the prelude to a new life and a long and honorable career.²⁵ Kentucky boasted of two colleges, St. Joseph's at Bardstown, founded by Rev. George Elder in 1819, though classes were held in the basement of the Seminary until the first wing of the College was finished in 1820; and the second, St. Mary's near Lebanon, in Marion County, was just under way. Father Nerinckx secured a plot of land for it in 1820, and it was to be carried to a flourishing state by Rev. William Byrne, who in twelve years educated over 1,200 boys.²⁶

Grassi, writing for Europeans, naturally takes a European viewpoint, and like other visitors to our shores is most impressed with the spirit of toleration both of the government

²⁴ SHEA, *History of Georgetown College*, Washington, 1891, p. 54 sq.

²⁵ HERBERMANN, *Sulpicians in U. S.*, New York, 1916, pp. 114, 131.

²⁶ WEBB, *op. cit.*, pp. 276 and 282 sq.

and of the people, as soon as Catholics and Catholicism became familiar to them in their true light.

The value of his little work for historians lies not so much in presentations of new facts as in his general picture of contemporary missionary life, its difficulties and hopes for the future.

It is an interpretation for the Old World of the New as he saw it from the inside during his seven important years in this country. It helps a little more to realize what we are, and to nourish a fair hope that we may be one day as much greater than we now are, as now we are greater than the infant church of 1819.

Grassi's subsequent life was spent in important positions in the Society in Italy from 1821 as Rector of the College in Turin, and later as Rector of the College of Propaganda and assistant to the General for Italy in Rome, where he impressed George Ticknor, who met him there, as "a man of talent and education."

He died at Rome, December 12, 1849.

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